

# Oak Creek Wildlife Area

## 2018-19 Wildlife Area Management Plan Update



*Figure 1: Wildflowers on the Oak Creek Wildlife Area*

This document is intended to highlight accomplishments as they relate to goals and objectives identified within the [Oak Creek Wildlife Area Management Plan](#). The plan addresses the status of wildlife species and their habitat, ongoing restoration efforts, and public recreation opportunities at the Oak Creek Wildlife Area. Every 10 years, WDFW revises management plans for each wildlife area to identify new management priorities and actions. In between plan revisions, the update focuses on recent accomplishments over the last two years.



*Figure 2: Oak Creek Wildlife Area*

## **Oak Creek Wildlife Area Management Highlights**

### **Noxious Weed Management (Goal #1, Objective C)**

The staff at Oak Creek Wildlife Area have been busy with the constant emergence of noxious weed species across the wildlife area. Staff have inspected approximately 8,000 acres annually and have treated approximately 250 acres with spot treatments, primarily with the use of backpack spray equipment. In addition to state funding, two separate grants from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation have been awarded for weed control on the wildlife area.



*Figure 3: Oak Creek staff members and RMEF volunteers spray Scotch thistle*

### **Elk Fence Repair and Replacement (Goal #1, Objective D)**

After careful inspection and prioritization of needs, approximately three miles of elk fence was replaced on the Cowiche Unit. Due to age and wildfire damage, dilapidated wooden fencing was replaced with more durable all steel design. Many other minor repairs were conducted during annual fence inspections. Approximately 40 miles of elk fence are

monitored annually. Additionally, six spring-loaded elk return gates and four vehicle gates were constructed for replacement and/or new construction.



Figure 4: New fence built on the Cowiche Unit

### Acquisition Priorities (Goal #1, Objective E)

Acquisition priorities are focused on adjacent land to the wildlife area with the purpose of expanding wintering habitat for elk, mule deer, and other species. Funding was received from the Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife to acquire 4,486 acres of shrubsteppe and dry forest habitat in the Cowiche Watershed, in coordination with Forterra and Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF). The purchase secures key habitat and a migration corridor for an astonishing array of species, including mule deer, elk, Neotropical birds, raptors, bats, and more than 70 butterfly species. By expanding the Cowiche Unit, it will also conserve more than seven miles of Cowiche Creek, an important spawning and rearing habitat for bull trout, coho, and Chinook salmon.

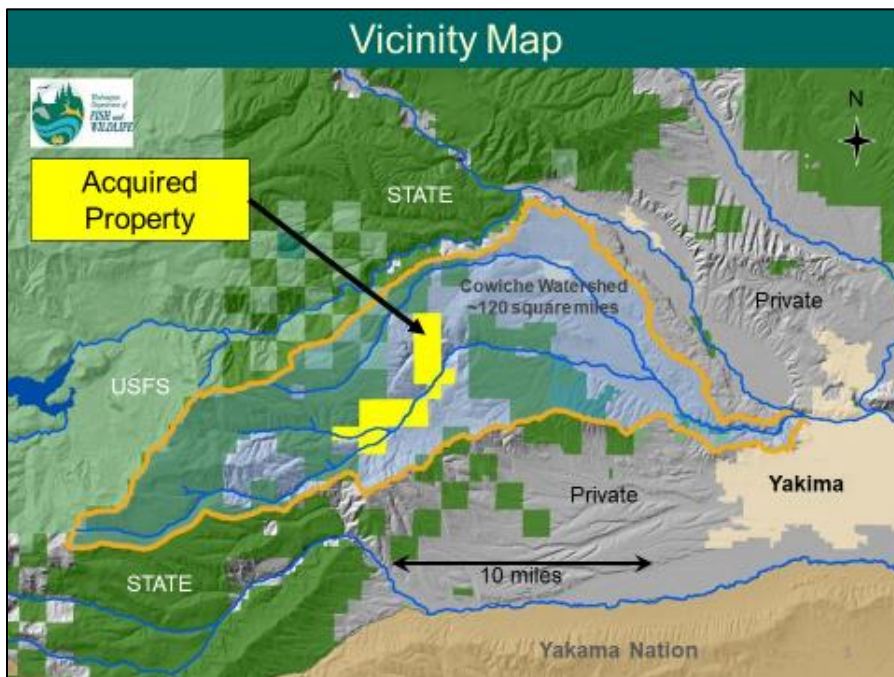


Figure 5: Vicinity map of the acquired property

## Forested Habitat Improvement (Goal #2, Objective A)

During this planning cycle, restoration projects have been completed on 1,083 acres on the Oak Creek Wildlife Area.

WDFW prescribed fire staff, RMEF volunteers, and forestry contractors completed 923 acres of pre-commercial thinning. Hand piling of slash occurred on 85 acres across all thinned areas, primarily along roadways. Prescribed broadcast burning of 125 acres was completed on commercial and pre-commercial thinned units. WDFW prescribed fire staff completed preparations on an additional 235 acres of broadcast burn units. Burning operations will resume in the spring and fall of 2020. Additionally, 34 acres of post fire tree planting was completed. Ponderosa pine and western larch seedlings were planted within the 2016 Rock Creek fire.



*Figure 6: Rock Creek Unit in June 2018 before non-commercial thinning occurred*



*Figure 7: Rock Creek Unit in July 2019 after non-commercial thinning occurred*



*Figure 8: Prescribed burning on the Oak Creek Unit*

### **Western Gray Squirrel Protection (Goal #2, Objective C)**

Forestry staff members coordinated with the WDFW Science Division by planning western gray squirrel surveys within proposed forest treatment units on the Oak Creek Unit, south of US Highway 12. Surveys are planned for spring 2020. Information gathered will be used to help direct forestry treatment prescriptions. Detected nest sites and other important habitat features will be protected, and other areas within the treatment area will be evaluated for their habitat potential.

### **Tapash Forest Partnership (Goal #2, Objective E)**

The wildlife area coordinated with the Tapash Collaborative on a grant application to further cross-boundary thinning and prescribed fire projects. Tapash submitted a proposal to the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) All-Lands Restoration Competitive Grant Program, which if successful will provide funding to plan joint treatments within the Tieton watershed, part of the larger Ahtanum-Tieton 2020 planning area identified in the Forest Health 20-Year plan. Wildlife area staff members provided information on current and upcoming treatments that would contribute to the landscape goals.

### **Oregon White Oak Enhancement (Goal #3, Objective A)**

Forestry staff members continue to assess the condition of Oregon white oak habitat. With help from RMEF and Naches Lion's Club volunteers, a 10-acre project was identified for Oregon white oak enhancement. The site will be monitored to evaluate the response of released oaks.

### **Lefthand Fire 2019**

In July 2019, an early morning thunderstorm ignited a small fire on the Rock Creek Unit. U.S. Forest Service and DNR responded early to control the fire, which was burning in steep terrain within dense forest habitat. The fire resisted initial control efforts and continued to grow to an eventual final footprint of 3,462 acres (1,162 acres on WDFW lands). The terrain made containment difficult, and most affected acres burned at low-severity, consuming smaller woody debris and cured vegetation without killing standing trees. Some very steep slopes aligned with winds and dense trees burned hot, but these areas were generally small and scattered in a mosaic fashion. Vegetation recovery was already observed in the early fall, and the many unburned islands within the fire perimeter will provide additional diversity of habitat conditions.



Figure 9: Lefthand fire on July 28, 2019



Figure 10: Lefthand fire on July 23, 2019



Figure 11: Landscape effects after the fire stopped burning

### **Winter Feeding (Goal #8, Objectives A, B, and C)**

Five winter feeding sites are annually inspected and treated for noxious weeds. Of these five, four are currently in use (including Bighorn Sheep Feed Site) with the fifth (Junction) remaining an option during exceptionally severe winters to reduce elk numbers at the main

Oak Creek feeding location. Oak Creek Wildlife Area has seen some mild winters during this period with feeding not being necessary at the main Oak Creek site during the 2017-2018 winter season. Furthermore, feeding was not necessary here until February during the 2018-2019 winter season. Nonetheless, feeding was conducted daily at these locations as necessary, and conflict with local agricultural growers was minimal as a result.

#### **Stream Restoration (Goal #10, Objective A)**

Yakama Nation Fisheries has applied for a grant for stream restoration and wood replenishment projects on the Tieton River. The project area occurs within the Oak Creek Wildlife Area. Wildlife area staff members have reviewed the proposal and are supportive.

#### **Tieton River Rock Climbing (Goal #11, Objective C)**

Approximately 3.5 miles of trail is inspected annually by Oak Creek Wildlife Area staff and volunteers representing the climbing community and Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance. A grant funded by REI was implemented to improve trail access at Royal Columns and The Bend climbing areas that improved safety while also implementing resource protection measures to keep users on the trail, improve drainage, and reduce erosion.

#### **Wildlife Education Corp (WEC) and Visitor's Center (Goal 11, Objective E)**

The WEC continues to operate at full capacity even with the unfortunate Aquatic Lands Enhancement Account funding loss during 2017-2019 biennium. They are able to staff the Visitor's Center seven days per week during winter feeding, and other peak times, such as the opening of the winter closure areas for shed antler hunting.

#### **Trail Maintenance with Volunteer Groups (Goal 11, Objective R)**

At least three meetings were held between Oak Creek Wildlife Area staff and members of the Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance to discuss trail improvements along the Tieton River compatible with other uses. Volunteers with Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance have done trail maintenance and GPS work, and identified needs for future improvements on at least 3.5 miles of trail along the Tieton River. Oak Creek Wildlife Area staff members plan to continue this relationship while expanding the trail system, including loop options along the Tieton River that will access Oak Creek Wildlife Area.

Additionally, two separate Eagle Scout projects are in process to improve existing non-motorized trails on the wildlife area. One project involves on the ground marking of the William O' Douglas Trail that crosses the north half of the Cowiche Unit. The other includes mapping and kiosk installation at the Waterworks Canyon Access Site on the Cleman Mountain side of the Oak Creek Unit.

#### **Tim's Pond Improvements and ADA access (Goal 11, Objective V)**

Recreational fishing access improvements were completed at Tim's Pond with funding from the Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO). Two new CXT toilets were installed at the site as well as trail and parking area improvements. Seven fishing platforms were constructed along with a paved ADA accessible trail that accesses four platforms, as well as one of the CXT toilets. Additionally, a paved disabled parking area was constructed near the ADA accessible CXT.



*Figure 12: Portion of the ADA accessible trail at Tim's Pond*

### **Grazing (Goal 12, Objectives A and B)**

Current grazing leases identified in the plan continue to be monitored on the wildlife area and continue to show light to moderate utilization. An additional lease has been established on the majority of the Rock Creek Unit in collaboration with our neighbor the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) within this checkerboard ownership pattern. This was initiated as a trial area to convert the current USFS grazing allotment from sheep to cattle, thus further buffering wild sheep populations to the south and east from spread of disease by domestic sheep. Currently, this permit has far exceeded expectations on utilization, and local USFS staff members are supportive of moving forward with the conversion of this allotment. During this transition, WDFW has issued a three year permit.

A draft management plan is nearly finalized by the Cowiche Canyon Conservancy to comply with standards required by the memorandum of understanding established at the time of purchase by WDFW and transition of grazing rights to the Conservancy.

### ***New Issues***

#### **Land Acquisitions (Goal 1, Objective E)**

Staff members are currently working with an adjacent landowner to finalize the purchase of approximately 100 acres of dry forest and critical riparian habitat that will be added to the Oak Creek Unit. The acres gained by WDFW are valuable habitat for bull trout, steelhead, golden eagles, rocky mountain elk, and mule deer. After the property has been acquired, the next steps will include planning and on-the-ground implementation of projects to control noxious weeds, manage the current grazing lease, protect riparian habitat, and potentially perform in-stream restoration. Additionally, staff members continue to pursue other lands previously identified in the Cowiche Watershed for purchase or conservation easement agreements.

#### **Elk Fence (Goal 1, Objective D)**

Plans have been initiated to begin replacement of approximately three miles of elk fence in 2020. This fence will be constructed in a priority area just south of the Tieton River.